

OPINION

Jackson zoning, planning board members take cluelessness to the next level


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What's in the drinking water at the Jackson municipal building? What explains the repeated halfwitted actions by Jackson planning and zoning board members over the past two years?

The latest incident (</story/news/local/communitychange/2019/05/20/jackson-outrageously-targeted-orthodox-jews-lawsuit-claims/1150572001/>) was the ill-advised decision by two zoning board members, including the chairman, and a planning board member to attend a local meeting of [CUPON](/story/news/local/rockland/2019/02/14/cupon-rockland-expands-countywide/2788680002/) (</story/news/local/rockland/2019/02/14/cupon-rockland-expands-countywide/2788680002/>), a Rockland County, N.Y.-based anti-development group with a reputation for being anti-Orthodox.

Why was attending the meeting a problem? As zoning board attorney Sean Gertner put it, attending a meeting where "anti-development strategies are being discussed potentially taints the outcome of both any individual application and potentially adds fuel to the fire of future litigation." The zoning and planning boards both make decisions about land use matters.

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The risk the board members' attendance at the meeting could have on their perceived impartiality in judging applications should have been fresh on their minds. In May, a new lawsuit brought by Agudath Israel ([/story/news/local/communitychange/2019/05/20/jackson-outrageously-targeted-orthodox-jews-lawsuit-claims/1150572001/](https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2019/05/20/jackson-outrageously-targeted-orthodox-jews-lawsuit-claims/1150572001/)), an Orthodox Jewish advocacy group, alleged township officials have been "religiously and racially discriminatory."

Previously, the group filed a lawsuit claiming Jackson officials passed ordinances banning school and dormitory construction as a way to single out Orthodox Jewish development. That would violate a federal act that protects religious groups from overly burdensome land use regulations.

The board members should have known how their attendance at the CUPON meeting could have opened the township up to further litigation. Actually, they did. [A Lakewood blog published audio and images \(https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2019/08/is-there-a-conspiracy-to-keep-orthodox-jews-out-of-jackson-audio.html\)](https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2019/08/is-there-a-conspiracy-to-keep-orthodox-jews-out-of-jackson-audio.html) of the trio attending the meeting. In one audio clip, zoning board Chairman Sheldon Hofstein was heard saying, "we're not supposed to be here." Planning board member Richard Egan tried to reassure him: "We didn't sign in. We're neutral — like, we're invisible." Sorry, not quite.

Foolish and anti-Semitic behavior plagued the zoning board in 2017. Board member Anthony Marano was charged with possession of child pornography and brandished a loaded handgun at the arresting officers. Former board member John Burrows made a Facebook post calling on Ocean County politicians to commit suicide because of their relationships with the Orthodox Jewish community of Lakewood. And newly appointed zoning board member Larry Schuster resigned after it came to light that he had posted crude memes about Orthodox Jews on his Facebook page.

That troubling year prompted the township to pass an ordinance aimed at improving the vetting process for potential board candidates. Among other things, it required applicants to provide references and links to their social media accounts. Some tweaks would seem to be in order.

Asked to comment about his attendance at the CUPON meeting, Egan remarked, "I did it for the good of the town." The only good thing Egan, Hofstein and Sullivan did for the town was resigning their seats.



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Randy Bergmann (Photo: Staff)

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